Digital Marketing Institute

SEO (SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION)

Study Notes

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SEO (Search Engine Optimization)

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LESSON 1: SEO FUNDAMENTALS

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PAID VERSUS ORGANIC SEARCH

What is search engine optimization?

Here's a definition by "Search Engine Land," which is a leading search engine news website:

> *Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of getting traffic from free, organic, editorial, or natural search results on search engines.*

Let's have a look at the differences between paid and organic search.

Difference between paid and organic search

When we say organic search, we mean SEO (search engine optimization). We sometimes call it natural search. And we're going to compare that now to paid search. So that's where you advertise on search engines.

Time

One of the key differences is the time factor. So, with paid search, it's near instant results, and often in minutes. Whereas, with organic search, results can often take weeks, months, and sometimes even years. So we really do have to play the sort of medium to long game with organic search.

Paying

When it comes to paying, well, as the name suggests, paid search, you're actually paying on a pay-per-click basis, and this happens on a cost-per-click basis. That means that if you want to appear for a keyword, you have to pay the search engine a particular amount for that keyword. For organic search, it's actually "free." And we've got free in quotes, and that's because it does require resources and time, and so there is an investment element to it as well.

Return on investment

In terms of the return on investment (ROI), it's actually much easier to measure with paid search. That's partly because Google actually provides more keyword data that you can capture in Google Analytics. And for organic search, it is a little bit harder to measure and sometimes, initially, the return on investment for organic search sometimes doesn't appear to be that good, and that's because it takes time.

It takes weeks and months for your SEO to actually progress. Over the long run, organic search can have a very good return on investment. And when it comes to the share of traffic, roughly 20% to 30% of searchers click on paid results, and that compares to 70% to 80% on SEO results. Most clicks are actually on the organic or the search engine optimization results.

If we look at the top box "A" below, that is the paid results. So, we sometimes call that pay-per-click or cost-per-click.

And then below that in the "B" box, we've got the search engine optimization results, which we sometimes organic or natural.

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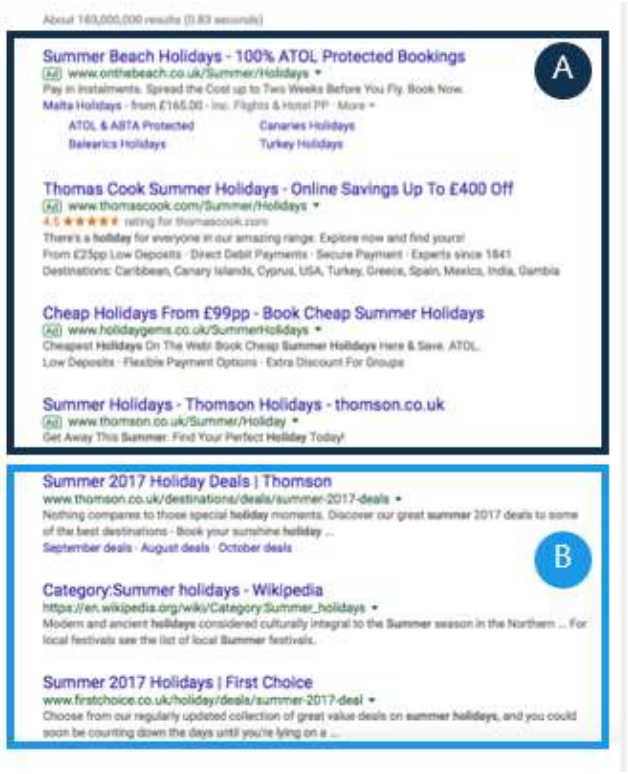
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Similarities

Let's just have a little look at the similarities between the two.

Keyword research

We're using a search engine for both and it requires a user entering in a keyword. So we'll need to do some keyword research for organic search and we're going to do some keyword research for paid search.

Landing pages

In order for those pages to provide a good result to the user, we're going to need to create landing pages. And that's really just another way of saying that we need a page that has content that targets the keywords.

For SEO, a landing page needs to be connected on the website, so it needs to be linked to from the website. And for paid search, it can be the exact same page as organic, or it can be a completely separate page that sets off the websites.

Traffic

When it comes to traffic, that's obviously a big goal as well.

Now, let's assume that we've done a good job with our SEO. We've optimized the landing pages around the keywords, then we can expect to start getting relevant traffic. And that's the same for paid search as well.

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HOW SEARCH ENGINES WORK

The three pillars of SEO

While SEO changes frequently in small ways, its key principles do not. Since Google came onto the scene in the late 1990s, we can break SEO into three components.

- **Technical optimization** is the process of completing activities on your site that are designed to improve SEO but are not related to content. It often happens behind the scenes.
- **On-page optimization** is the process of ensuring the content on your site is relevant and provides a great user experience. It includes targeting the right keywords within your content and can be done through a content management system.
- **Off-page optimization** is the process of enhancing your site's search engine rankings through activities outside of the site. This is largely driven by backlinks, which help to build the site's reputation.

Search engine algorithms

Search engine algorithms are computer programs that look for clues to give the searcher the exact results they are looking for. Search engines rely on algorithms to find web pages and decide which ones to rank for any given keyword.

There are three steps to how search engines work:

- **Crawling**, which is the discovery stage.
- **Indexing**, which is the filing stage.
- **Ranking**, which is the retrieval stage.

Crawling

The first step is crawling. Search engines send out web crawlers to find new pages and record information about them. We sometimes call these web crawlers 'spiders' or 'robots'. Their purpose is to discover new web pages that exist, and also to periodically check the content on pages they've previously visited to see whether they've changed or been updated.

Search engines crawl web pages by following links they've already discovered. So if you have a blog post and it's linked from your homepage, when a search engine crawls your homepage, it will then look for another link to follow and may follow the link to your new blog post.

Indexing

The second step is indexing. Indexing is when a search engine decides whether or not it is going to use the content that it has crawled. If a crawled web page is deemed worthy by a search engine, it will be added to its index. This index is used at the final ranking stage. When a web page or piece of content is indexed, it is filed and stored in a database where it can later be retrieved. Most web pages that offer unique and valuable content are placed into the index.

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A web page might not be placed in the index if:

- Its content is considered duplicate.
- Its content is considered low value or spammy.
- It couldn't be crawled.
- The page or domain lacked inbound links.

Ranking

The third step is really the most important step, and that is ranking. Ranking can only happen after the crawling and indexing steps are complete. So once a search engine has crawled and indexed your site, your site can be ranked.

There are more than 200 ranking signals that search engines use to sort and rank content, and they all fit under the three pillars of SEO: technical optimization, on-page optimization, and off-page optimization.

Some examples of signals that search engines use to rank web pages are:

- **Keyword presence in title tag:** Engines check to see whether the keyword or a synonym was mentioned on the page and within the title tag.
- **Loading speed of web page:** Engines check to see whether the web page loads quickly and is mobile friendly.
- **Website reputation:** Engines check to see whether the web page and website is considered reputable for the topic being searched for.

Google Hummingbird

Google's main search algorithm is called **Google Hummingbird**, and it is responsible for deciding how to order and rank search engine results.

In 2013, Google upgraded its main algorithm and named it Hummingbird. This upgrade included Google being better able to understand the meaning of keywords and to return more relevant results.

In 2015, Google announced **RankBrain**, which is a sub-algorithm of Hummingbird and an artificial intelligence system. It processes search results to provide more relevant results for users. This further illustrates the importance of understanding the true meaning of keywords, rather than just matching keywords to pages that mention them.

KEYWORDS

What is a keyword?

A keyword is a word or phrase that a user enters into a search engine to accomplish a task. In general usage, a keyword normally implies just one word, but for SEO it can mean one or more.

Types of keywords

Let's look at the different types of keywords. Broadly speaking there are three types of keywords: navigational, informational, and transactional.

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Navigational

Navigational queries are keyword searches for a specific website or web page. A query essentially means a keyword – it is what you're querying in a search engine. Queries and keywords are used interchangeably in SEO. Moz or moz.com is one of the best-known SEO websites.

Example keywords for moz.com are:

- Moz (the brand name)
- moz.com (the website URL)
- rand fishkin moz (the name of one of the website's co-founders)

We can think of these types of keywords as signposts that direct searchers to a place they already have in mind. If you search Google for a brand name, a URL, or a person's name, you are using navigational queries.

Informational

Informational queries are keyword searches used when the searcher is looking for information. For example:

- How to do keyword research
- Keyword research guide
- Navigational vs informational keywords

Informational queries make up the largest proportion of keywords and happen at the earlier awareness stage of the buying cycle, so they are harder to convert into sales. Blog posts are examples of content where informational keywords are often targeted. That's because a blog post is more about informing, rather than selling.

Transactional

Transactional queries are keyword searches where the searcher is showing signs that they are ready to purchase something. For example:

- Keyword research tool
- Best keyword suggestion tool
- Keyword analysis software

Transactional queries happen at the last stage of the buying cycle and are easier to convert. However, they tend to be more competitive as they are targeted on sales pages and are often the first keywords to research and optimize for.

Keywords and the buyer's journey

Let's take a look at keywords and the buyer's journey.

The key stages in the buyer's journey are:

- Awareness
- Interest
- Consideration

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- Conversion
- Retention

Navigational keywords form a smaller proportion of all keywords. They are often brand-related keywords. These queries tend to happen at all stages of the buyer's journey. If the buyer has done their research and decided on a product or a website that they want to buy from, they'll quite often finish on a brand term.

Informational keywords collectively form the largest proportion of all keywords. These queries happen earlier in the buyer's journey, during the awareness and interest stages, and sometimes the consideration stage. They are harder to convert into sales, but less competitive to rank for.

Transactional keywords form a smaller proportion of all keywords. These queries happen in the last stage of the buyer's journey, when the customer is ready to buy. These queries are easier to convert into sales, but more competitive to rank for.

SERPs

What is a SERP?

SERP stands for Search Engine Results Pages, and these are the results that you see after you search for a keyword. They always include Organic (SEO) results.

For transactional keywords, you'll often see Paid Search Ads (Google Ads) above and below the Organic results. And for information keywords, you'll sometimes see featured items like Direct Answers and the Knowledge Graph, which can be above or to the right of Organic results.

Organic results consist of: title tags, URLs, meta description tags, rich snippets, and site links.

What we first see is the **title tag**.

This is one of the most important elements where we need to think about working our keywords into. And that's because search engines pay a lot of attention to the title tag. It's also the first thing the user sees before they click on to your listing.

And below that we can see the **URL**. So, essentially that's your web address.

Below that, we've got the **meta description tag**. That's a short little snippet that you've got to really sell to the searcher that your website is worth clicking on.

And then below that sometimes what you'll also see are **rich snippets**. (We can't actually see this in the results that we're looking at now because it doesn't exist in this example.) So in this example, there are some stars and there is a number out of 5, 4.8, and some reviews. And when we use rich

snippets in SEO, it really can help with the click-through rate because it makes the results that much more engaging.

The last bit we can see are what we call **sitelinks** and these tend to show for navigational keywords. So remember, navigational keywords are often brand related keywords and when search engines think that you're an authority for a keyword, they like to show more listings from your website.

WALKTHROUGH: SEARCH ENGINE RESULTS PAGES

A search engine results page (SERP) is the page you see after you search for a keyword on a search engine.

There are different kinds of SERP:

- **Classic SERP**: This is the regular results page you see on a day-to-day basis, containing blue links on a white background.
- **Universal SERP**: This contains more information than a classic SERP, for example news results, videos, images, local listings.
- **Extended SERP**: This provides even more information on the one page, including knowledge graphs, related questions, and statistics.

Voice search assistants work by getting their information from the top of the SERP – known as Position Zero – when the answer to a search query is in the top of the SERP.

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LESSON 2: ALIGNING SEO AND BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

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TYPES OF SEO OBJECTIVES

Importance of SEO objectives

We'll first review the importance of setting SEO objectives.

They encourage buy-in from key stakeholders

The first one's really important. So let's imagine you've got a marketing manager as your boss or maybe the marketing director, or possibly, you even report to the CEO, maybe even you run an agency and your stakeholders might be your clients.

But from my experience, for SEO to really work, it needs to be embraced in the company. And I think, historically, for some reason, SEO has built up this reputation of being a bit of a dark arts. And for those that don't really understand SEO truly, people do think of it that way. It's this black box where magic happens and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't work.

And really your goal is to inform the stakeholders who are responsible for SEO in some way, how SEO works. And what I would advise maybe doing is after you've done this course, is just to summarize how SEO works and maybe even present it to someone. It could be a friend, or it could actually be one of the stakeholders in the business.

They help to formulate your SEO strategy

The second reason why SEO objective is important is they really help formulate to your SEO strategy. So, if you don't know where you're heading, it's very difficult to actually get to that place. And if you think about it, when you go into a car and you want to go on a long journey, you might use some sat nav to tell you how to get to that destination.

But if you can't put in the destination that you want to get to, you're going to find it very difficult to get there. And it's similar with SEO. We need to set objectives so we can be clear where we want to get to, and we can actually move in that direction.

They ensure objectives are met

The third one is, they ensure objectives are met. There's an old saying, "What gets measured gets managed," and I find that really is true.

What should you measure?

So, while it can feel like a laborious task to set objectives, it really helps you with your SEO progress. So what types of things should you measure?

- **Keywords:** Well, keywords are important, so we can set objectives for keywords. And we're going to look at how you do keyword research, and we'll talk about how you can measure keyword rankings as well. But essentially, what you might find is that you've got a target list of keywords, maybe it's 50 keywords, it could be a lot more. But let's say it's 50 keywords and you want to set objectives around how well you're doing for those keywords.
- **Traffic:** It might be traffic-related. So, when you get website traffic to your website, you want to see how well you're doing for organic search or SEO.

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- **Market share:** Maybe it's market share-related. So, when you do your keyword research, you'll actually get an idea of what search volumes are actually happening for keywords. And when you do that, you can start to work out what the market share is for a list of keywords that you want to target. And perhaps, you're getting a certain percentage of the market share and you want to increase that.
- **Brand or product awareness:** For brand and product awareness, the more people are talking about your brand and searching for your brand, that's going to have a positive impact on your business.

So we'll talk about some ways of measuring the brand.

- **Lead generation:** Not all businesses can accept money on their website, some just sell services, for example, and we need a way of measuring how well that website is operating in terms of leads for the services.
- **Backlinks:** So if you want to build up your website's reputation, the best way to do this is by encouraging other websites to link to your site so we can set SEO objectives such as, "Hey, let's try and build 5 backlinks in the next 30 days."
- **Ecommerce:** We can also set objectives around ecommerce. So if you're familiar with Google Analytics, with a little bit of tweaking in the code on your website, you can actually set up tracking of e-commerce. And we can set objectives around that as well.
- **Ads revenue:** Maybe you're a large publisher or a blogger and it might be that actually the way that your business succeeds is by selling ads revenue, so that might be a way that you'll want to look and setting objectives.

SETTING OBJECTIVES

SMART objectives

The most common SEO objectives involve the measurement of keywords, traffic and conversions or sales. Here are some examples of SEO objectives that can be used as a guide to setting relevant objectives for your own business or website:

- "Improve our year-on-year organic traffic by 20% in quarter three and 25% in quarter four." This objective focuses on increasing organic website traffic.
- "Build 12 relevant backlinks from recognized industry websites within 12 months." The aim of this objective is to improve website reputation.
- "Generate 15% more 'request a brochure' leads from organic search within three months." If you don't sell anything on your website, an objective like this focuses on increasing leads which may convert to sales.

Objectives for different businesses

The focus of your objectives will vary depending on whether your business is transactional or informational.

If your business is transactional and you have an ecommerce element, you'll want to set your objectives around tracking sales and lead conversions. However, if you're a non-ecommerce commercial site, you'll want to focus on lead generations.

- **Ecommerce sites:** Objectives are often in tracking sales and lead conversions

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- **Non-ecommerce commercial sites:** Mostly interested in setting lead generation SEO goals

If your business is informational, you are more likely to set objectives focusing on brand awareness or website traffic.

- **Blogs:** Look for brand awareness or increasing their traffic
- **Large publishers:** Interested in ad revenue goals, for example increasing organic page views

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LESSON 3: KEYWORDS AND BUILDING AN SEO CONTENT PLAN

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TYPES OF KEYWORDS

What is keyword research?

Keyword research is the process of discovering the keywords used by potential customers to find your products and picking the most relevant keywords that are within your reach and that have a good search volume. And quite often what I find from experience of training companies is people feel that they know what keywords their customers are using.

And sometimes that is true, but sometimes it's not. It's the language that they're using internally in the office. And that can be quite different to the language that your customers are using. So it's a really important process that we spend some time doing.

The importance of keyword research

Why is it important to do keyword research?

Get the right kind of visitors to your site

What's going to happen if you get the wrong kind of visitor to your site? Well, it's likely to not convert into sales. It may convert into leads, but it could be the wrong type of leads, which means your sales team's not going to be very happy.

Identify keywords with high search volume and omit low volume terms

Let’s look at the search volumes for keywords. We can hang on to the phrases that have good search volume, and we can actually cut the keywords that actually have poor volume, that we've maybe thought were good but actually aren't particularly good.

Identify content gaps on your website

Another thing that keyword research is great for is identifying gaps on your website. So these are content gaps and this is more common than you might think.

So, when we lay out a website, quite often it might the web designer is actually leading the process, or maybe it might be your marketing manager, or your CEO who's actually decided what content to have. But it's not necessarily the content that your users or your potential customers are looking for. And you can identify that by doing keyword research.

Target keywords that are within your reach

And the fourth point that we're going to look at is targeting keywords that are within your reach. So, when we look at keywords, we're going to look at the, you know, we're going look at the transactional types of keywords, we're going to look at navigational keywords, and informational keywords. It's natural to think that many of the transactional keywords will be highly competitive or at least, you know, more competitive than the other two types of keywords. And, of course, we will want to target those, but we don't want to forget about the informational keywords which tend to be a little less competitive, but still useful in the marketplace.

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Short-tail and long-tail keywords

So let's have a look at the long and short of keywords.

Short-tail keywords

Short-tail keywords are typically one or two keywords. They tend to be less specific, so really, they're quite generic keywords in your industry.

So, if we think of skiing, ski holidays, snowboards, these are all one or two keywords. They're quite generic in describing an industry, and those are examples of short-tail keywords.

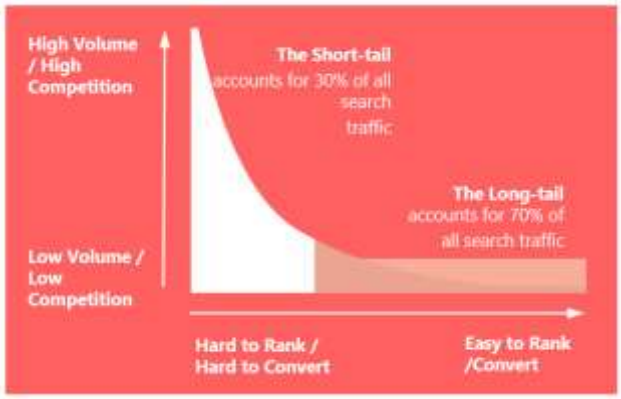
Long-tail keywords

If we move on to long-tail keywords, so these are typically three or more words, and they tend to be more specific as well.

So "best time to go to Whistler," so that's a skiing resort in Canada. "Self-drive ski holidays France," so most people take the plane to go skiing in Europe, but some people like to actually drive to their destinations. That's an example of quite a specific phrase. And another one could be "best snowboard for all-round mountain."

Short-tail versus long-tail keywords

Now if we look at this graph, we can see, on the left side, that we've got short-tail keywords. And this accounts for around 30% of all search traffic. And individually, these keywords have high search volume, so things like "ski," "snowboards," but they also have high competition.


High Volume / High Competition
Low Volume / Low Competition
The Short-tail accounts for 30% of all search traffic
The Long-tail accounts for 70% of all search traffic
Hard to Rank / Hard to Convert
Easy to Rank /Convert

Now to the right of this graph, we can see that there's around 70% of all search traffic comes from long-tail keywords. So these are keywords that individually have less search volume but collectively account for a large chunk of the search traffic.

Key differences

Okay, so what we're going to do now is, we're going to look at the differences between long- and short-tail keywords in a bit more detail.

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Intent

When we think about the intent of a keyword, let's say for skiing, we don't really know what the intent is. Maybe someone wants to go on a ski holiday, maybe someone wants to buy a ski, maybe someone wants to learn how to ski. There's quite a lot of different things people could be looking for.

Compare that to long-tail keywords, and the intent is much more specific. So maybe I'm looking for a self-catering ski chalet in the Cipher, France, that's more specific and that's a long-tail keyword.

Rank

When it comes to ranking, the short-tail keywords are harder to rank because they're more obvious. People have thought of ski or skiing as a key phrase and because individually they have a high search volume, people want to rank for those phrases as well.

For long-tail keywords, it's easier to rank for because there's less competition.

Conversion

When it comes to conversion, because the intent is vaguer with short-tail, it's actually normally harder to convert.

So if someone's typed in "ski holidays in France," and, you know, I would say that's a short-tail keyword, it's relatively hard to convert because there's a lot of ski destinations in France, and we don't know whether they're looking for the high-end luxury, we don't know whether they're looking for cheap.

And if you compare that to a more specific long-tail key phrase, so someone has decided the exact resort that they want to go to, they've decided they do want luxury, and maybe they've decided that they want to be catered for, then that's going to be easier to convert.

Search volume

When it comes to volume, so even though short-tail keywords individually have higher search volumes collectively, it's smaller, compared to long-tail keywords.

Research

Now one thing with short-tail keywords is it is easier to research. There's a smaller number of keywords, so you'll be able to research what those are, quicker. Whereas with the long-tail, it does require more research, what you can look at as a plus or a negative. It's a negative in that it will take more time, but it's a plus in that it's quite possible that your competitors won't go into enough research that's necessary.

HOW TO CONDUCT KEYWORD RESEARCH

Steps to Successful Keyword Research

Before proceeding with on-page optimization, we need to conduct keyword research following these steps:

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- **Pick a topic to research:** Focus on one topic or theme at a time. Imagine what the webpage you want to optimize looks like.
- **Brainstorm keywords:** Research keywords with similar meaning around a closely related topic. Focus on quantity over quality at this stage.
- **Review keyword value:** Gather keyword data to help decide how useful the keywords are, and whether they are within reach.
- **Prioritize keywords:** Decide which keywords are the most important, and which ones you wish to focus more on.

Your research topic could be a product or service, a source of information, or a brand or person. For example, 'What size snowboard do I need?' appears both informative and transactional but is considered informative as the searcher is researching before deciding to make a purchase.

Picking a topic to research

When picking a topic to research, it's important to focus on one topic at a time and make sure that it's closely aligned to your objectives and your industry. As you carry out your research, it's good to have a web page in mind as well as the needs of your customers.

Avoid being too generic or trying to research the whole website in one go. The most common mistake people make in keyword research is focusing on short-tail keywords that aren't relevant enough for search engines to rank. For example, targeting the phrase 'shoes' on a running shoes page is too generic, and not relevant enough for search engines to choose and searchers to be happy with.

Brainstorming keywords

The next step is to brainstorming keywords. This involves coming up with a list of keywords that are closely related to the topic you have chosen. You'll need to think of synonyms as well as plural and singular keywords. It is important to aim for quantity rather than quality, but the results still need to be relevant to your topic. Try to think of at least 10 keywords where possible.

When you are brainstorming, try to avoid straying too far off topic, trying to find only perfect match keywords, or stopping at two or three keywords.

Tools to help you brainstorm

There are some useful tools available to help you brainstorm for keywords.

- **Search engine suggestions and related searches:** You can see an example from Google below. The star has been added to the keyword search to get more specific results. The related search suggestions give more ideas around the same topic.
- **Google Keyword Planner:** Another useful tool is Google Keyword Planner, which is part of Google Ads. You can enter a keyword and it will give you a list of suggestions related to that keyword, as well as search volumes for the keyword. You can also use filters to customize your search.
- **Keywords Everywhere:** This is another helpful tool for brainstorming keywords. It is a free Chrome plugin and that can be used with Google Keyword Planner and other search engine interfaces.
- **Competitor keyword analysis:** Another approach you can take to brainstorm keywords is to look at the keywords your competitors use. SEMrush is a popular competitor keyword

analysis tool. You can put in a website's homepage and it will provide you with a list of that website's most valuable keywords.

- **Search volumes:** As you brainstorm, compile a list of keywords and include the search volumes for them so that you can compare them later on. In this example, you can see a list of keywords in the left column and the search volume for each keyword in the right column.

Steps to reviewing keywords

There are five steps to reviewing keyword value and difficulty.

1. Get the keyword search volumes.
2. Get the keyword difficulty scores.
3. Get the keyword rankings.
4. Review the keywords.
5. Assign a relevancy score.

Search volume and relevancy score

There are two key considerations when deciding which keywords are best for your topic and business.

- **Search volume:** The higher the search volume, the better the keyword is. For SEO we tend to target keywords at a country level, so select the most relevant country that you wish to target.
- **Relevancy score:** This is a subjective grading between 1 (high) and 3 (low) on how relevant a keyword is to a topic.

Keyword stuffing

In the example below, we have graded 'picking a snowboard' as a 3 for the relevancy to the topic. The topic is about snowboard sizing, so while 'picking a snowboard' is a related topic, it is actually a parent topic. You can also put an 'X' against keywords with zero search volume.

In some very niche industries, especially where there is a high average order value, you may still wish to target keywords that are flagged with zero search volume as it's still possible they may bring in traffic and conversions.

snowboard sizing
Snowboard Size Chart & Buyer's Guide | evo
Title tags need keywords but we can't fit all of our keywords in there

Keyword stuffing is frowned upon. If you look at a title tag, which is the blue clickable link in a search result, you'll see that it is a specific size. If that size is exceeded, it will be truncated; and if it is exceeded by a large amount, it will start to be ignored by search engines. On average, you can aim to work between three and five keywords into a title tag. It is important to focus on the most valuable keywords, and that's why prioritizing them helps.

Prioritize keywords

Based on the metrics you have acquired, pick out the most important keywords. Keywords with a good relevancy score and good search volume should be most highly prioritized. There will also be a subjective factor regarding how good a fit the keyword is for the business, and the likelihood that it will convert into business objectives.

Always choose one P1 keyword. This is the most important one to focus on and is known as the primary keyword.

Choose two P2 keywords. Also known as secondary keywords, these are the next most important keywords after P1 keywords.

Choose three or more P3 keywords. Known as tertiary keywords, these are the next most important keywords after P1 and P2 keywords.

Keyword	Monthly Google Search Volume	Topic Relevancy Score	Priority	
snowboard sizing	320	1	P1	Always one P1 keyword
snowboard size guide	320	1	P2	Two P2 keywords
snowboard size	320	1	P2	
what size snowboard do I need	170	1	P3	Three or more P3 keywords
snowboard size chart	170	1	P3	
snowboard size calculator	110	1	P3	
snowboarding size chart	90	1	P3	
snowboard sizes	70	1	P3	

In this example, all the keywords have been graded with 1 for topic relevancy which means they are highly relevant. So, in this case, prioritization has been decided based on search volume and subjectivity.

WALKTHROUGH: KEYWORD RESEARCH

You can use a keyword research tool, such as Moz Keyword Explorer, to discover new content ideas. When you open the tool:

- Set your location
- Enter a keyword
- Click **Analyze**
- In **Keyword Suggestions**, select **See all suggestions**
- A list of content ideas related to your keyword appears
- Refine the list by modifying the search volume
- Review the list and choose the most suitable ideas for content topics

TURNING RESEARCH INTO CONTENT

Conduct some research

We're going to do practical exercise now. And this can be for pages that already exist on your website, or maybe this could be for content gaps. This is for pages that don't exist on your site, but actually could be quite valuable to create. And what we're going to do is we're going to build a spreadsheet with the keywords that you've researched for topics.

Let's have a look at how you do that. So, in this example, this could be using Google Sheets. It could be using Microsoft Excel or any spreadsheet that you use. What I would encourage you to do is in the left column we just list the topics that you want to research.

A topic could actually just be, like I said before, it could be a webpage that you already have or maybe an area that's a gap that you'd like to create content for. And in the columns afterwards we want to have one P1 keyword, two P2s. And typically, we probably have between three and maybe six P3 keywords.

But it can vary on the topic that you're researching. So we can see we've got the keywords that we researched in the previous slide. And then we could actually go and build this further. I would encourage you to spend some time researching the first topic.

And I would probably say maybe somewhere between 45 minutes and an hour for the very first topic. And then what you'll find is as you do more and more topics you'll probably speed up the process. So it might only take you 30 minutes to do a topic. And that's a really good thing to do. And later in the training we'll look at how you can set up keyword rankings for these keywords as well so you can see how well you're ranking before you've made any changes and also how well you're ranking after you've made changes, which we'll cover in the on-page optimization section.

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LESSON 4: OPTIMIZING ORGANIC SEARCH RANKING

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TECHNICAL OPTIMIZATION

What is it?

Technical optimization is SEO activities that are completed on your site and are designed to improve SEO but are not related to content. So let's have a look at some of these features.

Features

So we're going to look at these **activities** in more detail, what they are in terms of ranking factors.

We'll look at some **ranking factors** that actually improve your technical optimization.

And what you'll find is sometimes you might need some **technical help**. So, if you're not that technical yourself, you might need to ask a web developer or someone that looks after, maybe, the web admin for your website.

And when it comes to the **time investment**, this is largely up-front. So, if you've got a website and you want to make sure that it's technically search engine-friendly, then we can do a lot of that at the beginning.

We'll also look at some **tools** that help make your website 'search engine friendly'. Screaming SEO Frog is a tool that's very good that you might like to investigate.

Google Search Console

Google Search Console is a free service that's offered by Google that helps you monitor and maintain your site's presence in Google search results.

Diagnosing technical issues

So essentially, if you've got a website and you want Google to know about it, it really helps if you register it for Google Search Console. And it's not just Google Search Console that you can register for. Bing has a very similar service which is called Bing Webmaster Tools. And some other things that you can have a look at in Google Search Console, we're going to cover now.

Crawlability optimization in four steps

We're going to have a look at these in four steps. And when we think about crawlability optimization, there are more things that we can investigate but these are maybe what we would call the top four.

Step 1: Minimize site errors

So firstly, we'll want to minimize site errors. We'll talk about redirects, how you use them wisely. We'll talk about why you need an XML site map and where you can submit one to. We'll also want to minimize duplicate content because you'll remember in order for content to be indexed it needs to be unique ideally.

And we'll also talk about how you can check to see if a page actually has been indexed. So minimize site and URL errors. Well, let's assume that you now have access to Google Search Console. You can

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either ask a colleague how you can get access to it, or if you just Google "Google Search Console setup" you'll find instructions there.

But one of the first things that you'll see in the crawl section is crawl errors, and these can be site errors or they can be URL errors. Now in this case, what we can see in this screen is there's actually 4,859 "Not Found" errors. So we really want to get that to be as low as possible, and really it's relative to the number of URLs on your site.

If you've got a site with 200,000 URLs, then, you know, 5,000 errors isn't that bad. But if you've got a site maybe with 20,000 URLs and a quarter of them are firing up errors, that's much more significant. And what we want to do is we want to minimize the errors on important landing pages.

In fact, they shouldn't be any errors at all on important landing pages because that will mean that possibly the pages can't be crawled or indexed, or if they are already crawled and indexed, it might just mean that the user doesn't find what they need. So use redirects wisely. So if you have changed the URL, maybe you've taken off an S from a URL, you've changed it from being plural to singular, if you haven't done a redirect what will happen is the old URL will throw up a "Page Not Found" error.

That means that if a search engine has built up history and trust about a URL, on the old URL and you haven't done the redirect, it means the reputation history won't be passed. It's bad user experience if someone's bookmarks an old URL and they can no longer find the new one.

Step 2: Use redirects wisely

You want to use a redirect and what we generally want to use more often than not is a **301** permanent redirect.

And that tells search engines that this is a permanent measure, it doesn't have to be forever, but it's not something that you're planning in changing in the short term.

302s are another form of a redirect. You know, some in the industry think that 302s don't pass any reputation and some believe that they do pass some or, in fact, all the reputation.

But to play it safe, I would generally advise to go for a 301 redirect if you do want to pass reputation.

The last one to look at is a **meta refresh**. This is something that can happen on the page and quite often it can be generated by JavaScript. So it's not something that we normally want to do for SEO but you might find some purposes for it for non-SEO reasons.

Step 3: Create and submit an up-to-date XML sitemap

What we're going to look at now is an XML site map. XML site maps are designed specifically for search engines and typically, they will list all the URLs that exist on your website. So, in this case, what we can see is this is for a website that has 25,000 or over 25,000 URLs have been submitted in the XML site map, but actually only 3,137 have been indexed.

So that means that there are a lot of URLs that haven't been indexed. And had we not created the XML site map and submitted it to Google Search Console? We wouldn't have known that information. And one of the reasons that might have happened is, do you remember in the previous step, we saw that the website had a lot of Page Not Founds.

So that would explain why quite a few of them hadn't been indexed. Maybe they've got a lot of duplicate content, but at least we know that in this case, we need to investigate further why Google isn't indexing the majority of the pages.

Step 4: Minimize duplicate content

Search engines generally prefer unique content. It takes a lot of resources to revisit pages during crawling and to access its pages and its index. So it wants to have a lean index as much as possible. So it's definitely not a good idea to copy content from other websites, and even you want to be careful about how you reuse content on your own website.

A little bit of duplication is okay, but if you've got, you know, the majority of a page is just duplicate to another page, it might mean that that page gets discounted or even it may just get de-indexed or not indexed at all. Okay. So step five is checking for index pages. Now in order for a page to rank, it has to be indexed.

And what will happen then is that you will see whether the page has actually been indexed or not. If it has been indexed, you'll get a version of the page and you'll see the date and the time of when it was indexed.

Technical SEO ranking factors

When we think of technical optimization, it's mainly about optimizing for crawlability and ease of access to get your pages indexed.

But there are factors that actually affect your SEO performance and rankings. The first one we're going to look at is site speed, we're then going to look at mobile friendliness, and then we'll finish off with HTTPS, so that's making your web pages secure.

Site speed

You need to understand how to improve site speed. Now, when we load a web page, really what we should be aiming for is two seconds or less.

If it's any longer, there is the worry that the user will get fed up and hit the back button or maybe they'll just get frustrated and get a bad feel for your business or your brand. So things that we can do is we can make file sizes smaller for images, we can compress texts and files. When a web page is

loaded, there may be as many as 100 requests being made, so maybe a request for an image, a request for a technical file like a CSS file.

And the smaller number of requests means the quicker the page is going to load. You may need to upgrade your web hosting. If your web host is maybe quite a cheap one, it might mean that you're not getting the performance that will really allow you to get a fast loading web page. There are quite a few more factors that we can look into as well which we will cover.

And one way you can do that is by using a tool provided from Google, and it's called **Page Speed Insights**. So with Page Speed Insights, it allows you to add in a URL and it will actually give you a score from Google to say how well optimized your web pages for speed.

So in this case, for the bbc.co.uk, the desktop gets a 76 out of 100, and there's actually some elements that the tool is offering to suggest improvements. You can also click on the mobile tab and get recommendations for mobile as well. But rather than use the mobile tab, another alternative you can do is actually use another separate Google tool, and this one is called **Test My Site - Think With Google**.

And the idea here is that you add in a URL and it just goes a little bit more in depth of how it checks your speed for mobile. So, in this case, it's saying that it loads in two seconds google.com, and this is on a 3G speed experience. This is considered a very good speed on 3G. So I definitely recommend checking out that tool.

One of my favorite tools is **Pingdom**. So with Pingdom, it's another tool that helps, you know, diagnose any issues with slow loading web pages. And what you can do is you put in a URL, you say "Test From" and then select the closest test area to your location, and then you can hit Start Test. And in this case, we can see for twitter.com, the load time is just over one second.

It's actually given it a performance grade of 90%, and it's saying there's 18 requests which is quite a small number. And if you use this tool and you actually scroll down, you'll get more details about things that might be slowing your website. So you'll be able to see whether you've got large images that maybe you can reduce in size. So I definitely recommend checking out pingdom.com.

Mobile friendliness

This is about making sure that your website renders in a nice way for mobile devices. And Google actually announced back in 2015 that this was a ranking factor, will be only a slight ranking factor, but a ranking factor nevertheless.

And also in 2015, mobile actually overtook desktop. So more people were using mobiles to Google search queries than they were desktops. And currently, Google has actually announced that it has plans to have a mobile first index, and this might happen quite soon.

And what that means is when Google actually builds up its index, it's going to do it in a way that responds to mobile devices primarily and secondary to desktop devices. So how can you check if your website is mobile friendly? Well, there is a tool called the Mobile-Friendly Test.

You enter in a URL and it will tell you whether your web page is mobile-friendly. Now this tool only checks, you know, a URL at a time. And if you do want to check out your whole website to see if it's search engine-friendly, then you can do that through Google Search Console. So that's another reason that you probably want to take a look at Google Search Console.

HTTPS

So the S in HTTPS means that the page is **secure**, the page will have a certificate, and that's something that Google announced as a ranking factor in 2014. And before that point, we generally only used HTTPS on private pages.

So maybe where you are taking the payment from someone or maybe where you're taking contact details from someone, we generally made those pages securely. But after 2014 or during 2014, what we actually started to see was lots of websites were actually making the whole website secure, and that's because there's a slight ranking benefit for doing that.

Now, if your website hasn't got a HTTPS, it's only a small ranking factor at the moment, but you might want to think about getting HTTPS which would require a certificate, but it would also require making sure all the old URLs, the HTTP redirect to the new URLs.

WALKTHROUGH: GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

You can use Google Search Console to help you with your technical SEO.

To begin, create a Google Search Console account and link it to your website. Some of the most important sections to work with are:

- **Overview**: Reports on your website's performance, coverage, and enhancements
- **Performance**: Contains lists of **queries**, **pages**, **countries**, or **devices**, which can be sorted by the number of **clicks**, **total impressions**, **average CTR**, or **average position**
- **Coverage**: Provides error details and tells you which pages are broken on your website
- **Sitemaps**: Lists all of the sitemaps that have been submitted for your site and allows you to add new sitemaps
- **URL inspection**: Helps you analyze specific URLs

ON-PAGE OPTIMIZATION

What is it?

On-page optimization is the process of ensuring the content is both relevant and provides a great user experience. In the past, many businesses approached it as simply keyword stuffing: mentioning their keywords as many times as possible within the content. This made for a poor user experience. These days, on-page optimization includes smart keyword targeting, where keywords are mentioned in key elements while still providing a good user experience. This means that your content reads well, and also satisfies what the user is actually looking for.

Changes are made through a Content Management System (CMS), meaning a non-technical person should be able to update it. If you have a modern CMS like WordPress, it should be easy to target keywords in key elements. This includes making images, headings, main body copy, meta description tags, and title tags.

Tools used

SEOptimer, SEO SiteCheckup, and MozBar are free SEO tools that can be used to scan the HTML of a web page and identify important on-page elements, allowing you to quickly check whether the page has been optimized or not.

Mozbar is a Chrome and Firefox extension created by Moz.com. It has more functionality in Chrome, as do many other SEO browser extensions. In this example of a results page from MozBar. You can see that the tool has found the URL, the page title, the meta description tag, the meta keywords, and the H1 tag.

Categories of on-page optimization

There are two categories of on-page optimization.

Pre-click on-page optimization

Pre-click on-page optimization is what is visible to the user before they click on a result on the search engine results page. It includes the title tag, the URL, and the meta description. The goal of pre-click optimization is to encourage the user to click on your listing.

Post-click on-page optimization

Post-click on-page optimization is what is visible to the user after they click on your listing and land on your web page. It includes the main copy, the main heading and sub-headings, hyperlinks, and images.

Title tags

After the main body copy, title tags are the single most important on-page element to get right. They are the first part of the listing that a user sees after they run a search, and search engines pay close attention to the words that are provided. This in turn influences how well your web page will rank.

In Chrome, you can view the title tag in the source code by right-clicking on the web page and selecting 'view page source'. The title for this web page will appear as <title>Corporate Training | Digital Marketing Institute</title>.

Title tags are a vital part of on-page optimization.

- **Heavy weight:** They are a heavy weight SEO signal and the single most important place to include keywords.
- **Higher rankings:** Web pages are ranked more highly if title tags are done correctly.
- First view: They are displayed as a blue clickable link and are the first thing a searcher sees

Optimizing title tags

How can you optimize title tags?

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Work in keywords

It is important to get the right blend of keywords when optimizing title tags. One of the reasons keyword research is prioritized is for title tag optimization. If the title tag looks like one long keyword list, you may be considered a spammer; but if it includes your main keywords, and is written in natural, compelling English, then it should work well.

Here are some tips:

- Include main (primary and secondary) keywords.
- Position main keywords nearer the beginning.
- Avoid keyword stuffing.

Use the space provided

The optimum space for a title tag is a maximum of 512 pixels, or approximately 55 characters. The SERP Preview Tool can be used to measure this.

Be descriptive and engaging

Describe the page in natural language and make it enticing for the searcher to click through.

Other tips

Other ways to optimize your title tags include using sentence separators and including your brand in the title text. Occasionally, Google will write its own title tag for the SERPs.

Let's take a look at this sample title tag for a fictional website called Snow Way Bro.

Keyword	Priority
snowboard sizing	P1
snowboard size guide	P2
snowboard size	P2
what size snowboard do I need	P3
snowboard size chart	P3
snowboard size calculator	P3
snowboarding size chart	P3
snowboard sizes	P3

You can see the title tag is a description of what the web page is about, and the brand has been included at the end. The description is engaging and targets the prioritized keywords. The P1 keyword is 'snowboard sizing', and you can see that it is at the beginning of the title tag.

If you look at the P2 keywords, 'snowboard sizing guide' has been included, which is very similar to 'snowboard size', and 'snowboard size guide'. The P3 keywords, or close variations of them, have also been included.

Meta description tags

Meta description tags are only visible in the SERPs and the source code. You cannot see them when you are viewing the main content of a page. A meta description tag is the short piece of descriptive text that you see under the URL in a SERP.

Meta description tags are important for on-page optimization, but they're not actually a direct ranking factor. Including keywords in your meta description won't have a direct impact like title tags do, but it will influence whether someone's going to click on your listing.

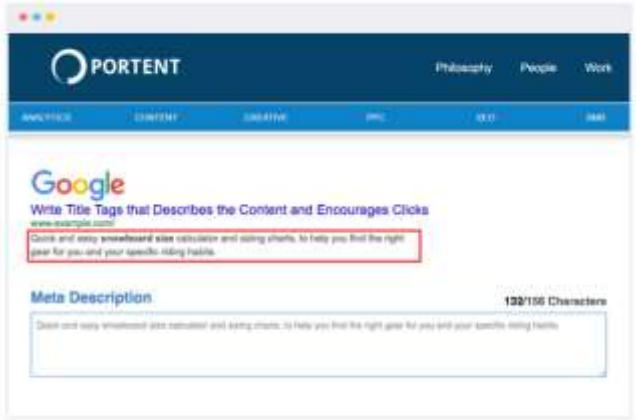
Meta description tags are a medium weight on-page SEO signal and encourage the searcher to click on your listing. If the meta description tag contains a searched term, it will be bolded, encouraging the searcher to click through.

Optimizing meta-description tags

Occasionally, Google will write its own meta description tag for a web page if it has been left blank or deemed not relevant enough, but there are ways that you can optimize your meta description.

- Keep it short and concise. Make sure it is two short sentences, at most.
  - Max desktop: 156 characters
  - Max mobile: 115 characters
  - Use the SERP Preview tool to test length.
- Be careful with your keywords. You'll find that you've probably mentioned quite a few keywords in your title tag already, so to avoid keyword stuffing don't include them all again in your meta description. As keywords don't help with rankings, it's best to include only your P1 keyword as it is likely to be bolded when searched for.
- Be descriptive and engaging. Make sure that your meta description is descriptive, but also engaging. If your page has any unique selling points, list them here to encourage click-throughs.

This example is displayed in the Portent SERP Preview Tool.



The user searched for 'snowboard sizing', and even though that exact phrase isn't mentioned, a close variant is – 'snowboard size' – so Google has bolded the text. When text is bolded, it improves the chances of the listing being clicked on. The example is also short and engaging. It's written in a way that would resonate with someone who is looking for help buying the right snowboard.

URLs

URL stands for 'Uniform Resource Locator', which is another term for a web address. URLs sit between title tags and the meta description tags. Over time, a page will build up trust and authority which is assigned to its URL. Changing a URL without redirecting appropriately can lose trust. Because of this, it is best not to change a URL where possible – try to get them right from the start.

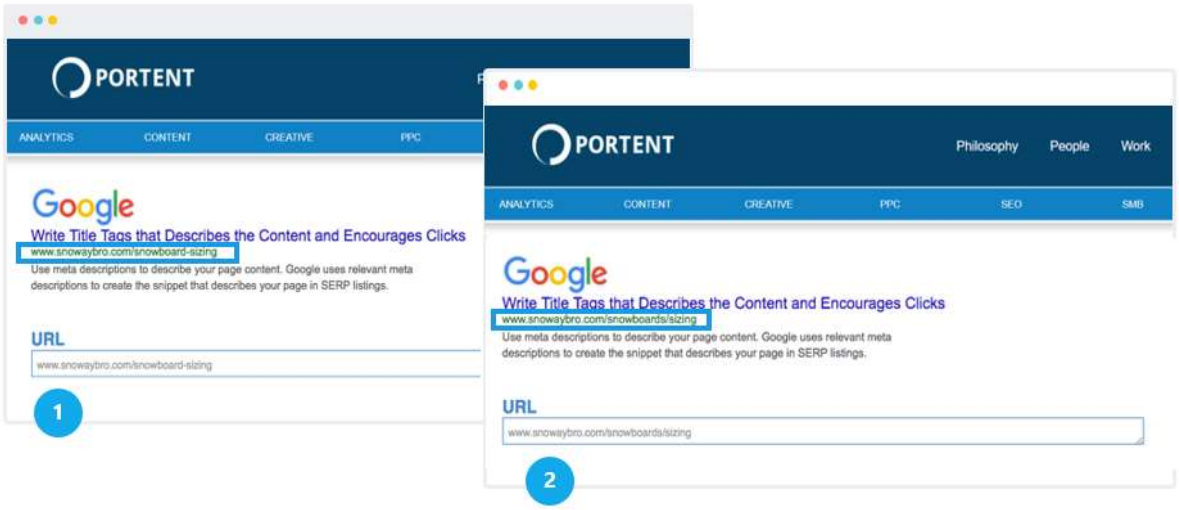
Why are URLs important? URLs are light weight on-page SEO signals. They attract click-throughs from search results and are used by search engines to index and retrieve pages.

Optimizing URLs

URLs are often generated from the main heading of the page. This is good as a default, because relevancy is added. But the downside is that they often become long and repetitive and need to be shortened. When creating a URL for your web page:

- Include your P1 keyword, or a close variation.
- Keep it short and concise (around 70 characters before truncation).
- Set the URL right at the beginning.
- Stick to conventions, such as using dashes and lowercase characters.

In this example, there are two different styles of URLs for the same web page.



Both are perfectly acceptable for SEO and would score about the same for relevancy. The first one ('/snowboard-sizing') is the simplest to do. The second one ('/snowboards/sizing') would be better for larger sites with lots of different types of products, because it gives an idea of the relationship of products to their parent categories.

Key elements for post-click on-page optimization

The key elements for post-click on-page optimization are:

- Headings
- Main body copy
- Images

Headings

Headings help to outline what a web page is about. They are used in a similar way on a web page to how they are used in Microsoft Word. The main heading should be within a H1 tag, secondary headings in H2 tags, tertiary in H3 tags – all the way up to H6 tags.

Headings are an important part of a web page. Users scan a page's headings before deciding whether or not to read the whole page. They are a medium weight on-page SEO signal and add relevancy to the page. There are six header tags – H1 through to H6 – which can be used to outline the hierarchy of content on a web page.

- Main heading should be in a H1 tag
- Secondary sub-headings should be in H2 tags
- H3 - H6 tags aren't used as often in body copy but work in the same hierarchal sub-heading way

Optimizing headings

When creating headings for a web page, it is important to ensure that they are meaningful to the user and not just geared towards SEO.

The keywords used should be tailored to the page type. Adding keywords can work differently depending on the page type:

- **Transactional pages** tend to be more keyword focused and usually include the main keyword or a close variant.
- **Informational pages**, like blog posts, tend to be more user focused and sometimes include the main keyword or a close variant.

The keywords used should also be targeted accurately. Look for opportunities to add your targeted keywords or similar meaning keywords as part of a heading.

In this example, we have used two exact keywords from the targeted keywords list. This is because it makes sense to do so, and helps the user.

Main body copy

Why is the main body copy important? The main copy is where users should find what they are looking for, so search engines pay close attention to it. It's a high weight on-page SEO signal and

adds relevancy to the page. Main copy is also known as body text. It can include hyperlinks and it features after the main heading.

Matt Cutts says there isn't an ideal keyword density formula, and advises against over-optimizing and loading too many keywords into your content. He does, however, say that including the keywords you'd like to rank for is a good thing; but it should be done in a natural way that enhances the readability of your web page.

Optimizing main copy

Length

There are no strict guidelines on length for the main copy of your web page, but it should meet the user's expectations and contain what they have searched for. It should also be long enough so that search engines can understand what the page is about.

Keywords

Avoid repeating keywords too often in the main copy, but do use synonyms or close variations of keywords if they can be incorporated while still keeping the language natural and human-friendly.

As Matt Cutts mentioned in his video, there isn't a special keyword density formula, but when you mention keywords too often, search engines may see it as being 'spammy'.

As a loose rule for 500 words, mention:

- Primary keywords two or three times
- Secondary keywords one or two times
- Tertiary keywords zero or one times

Hyperlinks

In SEO, hyperlinks help the page you are linking to. The way you link to pages internally plays an important role in search engine rankings.

- **Relevance:** Linking to pages with descriptive and easy-to-understand anchor text will pass more relevancy to the receiving page, so make sure you are linking to your important pages regularly.
- **Reputation:** Linking to pages internally is important for increasing reputation, so the more internal links your web page has, the more important it is deemed to be and it will stand a better chance of ranking.

Images

Image optimization is important because it is a light-weight on-page SEO signal and adds relevancy to your web page. Alt text should be added to images because it is often read out to visually impaired people who rely on screen readers.

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Optimizing images

While image optimization is only a light-weight on-page ranking signal – and it is often overlooked – it does add relevancy to the web page and helps screen reader users.

Three simple steps you can take to optimize your images are to:

- Add a description in the Alt text
  - Try to accurately describe the image and this sometimes means including keywords
  - Make them concise, typically two to five words
- Give images meaningful filenames
  - Make them concise, typically two to five words
  - Filenames and Alt text can be the same, but they don't need to be
- Make images web-friendly
  - Use gif, .jpeg and .png
  - Balance small file size and good quality

Alt text

The Alt text and filenames should be descriptive and accurate first – and contain keywords or related words second. This example is an image used on a web page about snowboard sizing. The Alt text for the image is 'snowboard sizing,' which is descriptive. The filename, snowboard-measurement.jpg, is slightly different. In this case, the Alt text contains one of the main keywords, and the filename is a related word that will add to the overall relevancy of the page. You'll also need to keep the size of images relatively low, and often much smaller than the original image size, to ensure it doesn't impact on loading times for the web page.

WALKTHROUGH: ON-PAGE GRADER

You can use Moz On-Page Grader to help understand your on-page SEO performance.

To evaluate a page for a keyword:

- Enter a URL in the **Page** field and a keyword in the **Keyword** field
- Click Analyze
- Review the results:
  - Keywords found
  - Keyword locations
  - Page factors (factors associated with your page that either help or hurt your page score)
  - Page score
- Use the results to improve your on-page SEO performance

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OFF-PAGE OPTIMIZATION

What is it?

Off-page optimization is the process of enhancing a website's search engine rankings through activities that happen outside of the website. This is largely driven by building backlinks to the site and is often the most influential factor for search engine rankings as it helps build the website's reputation.

The more high-quality backlinks you have from reputable websites, the more credible your website is seen to be and search engines will rank you more highly as a result. Although you may not be able to directly control how external websites link to your site, you can influence them by creating great content.

Off-page optimization is an ongoing activity, so if you stop acquiring backlinks, you may find that your competitors overtake you.

Tools

Link Explorer, Majestic SEO, and Ahrefs are SEO tools that you can use to analyze both your backlinks and your competitors' backlinks. They all offer a freemium model, which means you can get a free account and use some of the functionality for free.

Backlinks

Increasing the number of backlinks to your site is one of the key SEO goals. A backlink is an incoming hyperlink from one web page to another website. When a website receives a link from an external website, some reputation is passed to it. It acts as if one web page is voting that the page it links to is credible.

Google has a sub-algorithm called PageRank, which calculates how much reputation is passed. The text within the backlink is called anchor text and some relevancy from the text is passed. A credible page with valuable content can earn dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of backlinks.

Search engines can detect whether or not a backlink should add to your website's reputation. These three types of backlinks will add to your website's reputation.

- Topical backlinks: These are backlinks that are relevant to your industry are likely to bring in relevant referral traffic.
- High authority: These are backlinks that are reputable and trustworthy.
- Authentic backlinks: These are backlinks that are earned on merit. Search engines don't like to be tricked and any sites building phony links will receive a search engine penalty.

PageRank

PageRank is an algorithm used by Google Search to rank websites in their search engine results. It is used as a way of measuring the importance of website pages. According to Google, PageRank counts the number and quality of links to a page to determine a baseline estimate of the importance of a website. As such, more important websites are likely to receive more links from other websites. PageRank is the first algorithm that was used by Google, and it is the best-known.

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Tools for measuring PageRank

Moz and Ahrefs are popular SEO tool providers that supply metrics that mimic how PageRank may be calculated and estimate a value of how reputable a page and domain are.

Moz's Open Site Explorer offers two metrics, Page Authority and Domain Authority, while Ahrefs offers a URL rating and a domain rating.

- **Page Authority**, a page ranking score ranging from 1 to 100 that predicts how well a specific page will rank on SERPs.
- **Domain Authority**, a search engine ranking score ranging from 1 to 100 that predicts how well a website will rank on SERPs
- **URL Rating**, measures the strength of a target URL's backlink profile and the likelihood that the URL will rank high in Google. It is measured on a logarithmic scale from 1 to 100, with the latter being the strongest.
- **Domain Rating**, shows the strength of a given website's overall backlink profile. It is measured on a logarithmic scale from 1 to 100, with the latter being the strongest.

Although these metrics won't be exactly the same as what Google uses, they will give you a general idea of how reputable a page or a domain is.

Role of social media

Links within social media are different to backlinks and are known as social signals. They tend not to pass reputation or PageRank, but they can indirectly lead to an increase in backlinks; the more views you receive, the more likely it is that people will link to your website from theirs.

Link Explorer

Link Explorer is a tool provided by Moz that allows you to research where a website has got its backlinks from. This may be the site you look after, a competitor, or any other site that you wish to research. The backlinks are ordered by Page Authority, so according to Moz, you should get the most important ones first.

You can see in this example from Link Explorer that you can enter a URL in order to get its domain authority score and page score, as well as a list of incoming links.

Link Explorer is ideal for beginner to intermediate backlink analysis. Ahrefs and Majestic SEO are more suitable for experienced users because they have a larger and more thorough index of

backlinks. Although these tools are very useful, they are likely to be a simplified version of what Google uses.

WALKTHROUGH: AHREFS BACKLINK CHECKER

You can review your backlink profile (or your competitor's backlink profile) by using a tool like AHREFS Backlink Checker.

In this tool:

- Enter a domain or URL
- Click **Check backlinks**
- Review the backlink profile that is generated, including:
  - Domain rating
  - Number of backlinks
  - Referring domains
- Use the results to find out which pieces of website content are attracting links from other websites and consider producing more of this content

SEO ACTION PLAN

Mini technical SEO audit

We're now on the SEO action plan section. So what we're going to do now is we're going to look at some of the stuff that I've talked about in this module, and we're going to review some of the key things that you should be thinking about.

Let's start off with a mini technical SEO audit. I'd like you to have a website in mind and I want you to make note of the home page URL, and also a page of something that's relatively new. It could be a blog post or maybe a new product page that you've created, and we're going to do a little audit on these pages.

Check if a URL has been indexed

The first thing that we're going to do is we're going to check if the URL has been indexed. And previously I showed you one way of doing this, and this was where you typed in a keyword or URL into a search engine.

But there is another way that you can do this and that's what we're going to look at now. And the way that you do this is you copy that URL. So it would be the home page or that new page that's been recently created and you type into the address bar of a browser. So, in Google Chrome, you would type in the URL and before it, you would type in cache and colon.

So no spaces, cache, colon, the URL, and when you press return, if the page has been indexed, you'll see the page and you'll see the date and time it got indexed. If it hasn't been indexed, you'll see a 404 page not found. So, for those two pages, check to see whether they're indexed.

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It's very likely that the home page will be indexed if it's an established site. Now, if it's a new blog post, it might not have had time to get indexed yet, so you'd be able to check that out. And one bonus tip is if your page isn't indexed, what you can do is you can go into Google Search Console and you can actually submit that URL through Fetch as Google, which is part of Google Search Console.

Check if a URL passes the Google Mobile-Friendly Test

The next thing we're going to do, again, for both of those URLs, we're going to go to the Mobile-Friendly Test, which is a tool provided by Google, and we're going to test each of those URLs to see if they're mobile friendly. Hopefully, they will be but remember, you can also have a lurking Google Search Console and it will tell you whether your whole website is mobile friendly or not. But if you haven't got access to that, then obviously, just use this tool.

Check if a URL passes the two-second page load test

You'll remember we looked at Pingdom, which is a really good tool to check how fast your website is, and remember we're trying to look for pages that load under two seconds. So, if you're under two seconds, like Digital Marketing Institute is, then great, you've got a speedy web site.

If you're not, first of all, make sure the test location that you've put in is close to where you're searching from. And if you're not, what you can do is you can actually drill down and find out what's going wrong. Pingdom will give you an idea of some of the areas that you can improve on. You might need to get a web developer to help you and give you a hand if some of the things look a little bit technical.

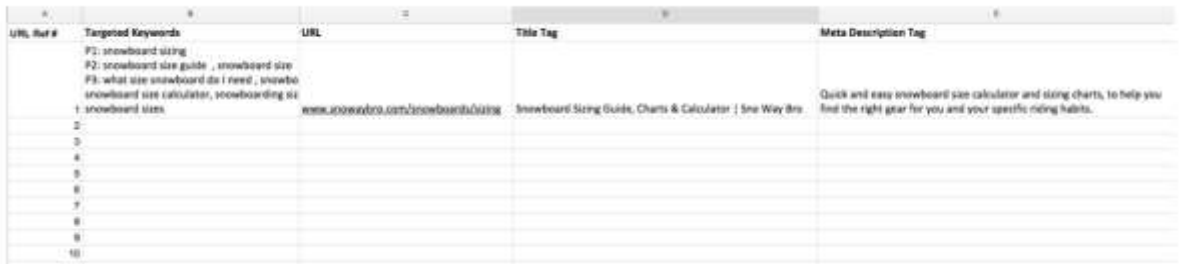
Review site and URL errors in Google Search Console

The next thing that I want you to do, again, if you do have access to Google Search Console, is to go in there, and under Crawl, you'll find a report called Crawl Errors.

And we just want to make sure that we haven't got many crawl errors, and for the crawl errors that do exist, we want to make sure that they're not for important landing pages. And again, for those two URLs that you're checking, the home page and the new page, they shouldn't be showing as errors here.

On-page optimization planner

This now brings us on to the on-page aspects of the action plan. And what I want you to do is you can see in front I've just created a spreadsheet. So let's just start off by thinking about 10 pages that need to be optimized on your site.



URL Ref #	Targeted Keywords	URL	Title Tag	Meta Description Tag
1	P1: snowboard sizing P2: snowboard size guide , snowboard size P3: what size snowboard do I need , snowbo snowboard size calculator, snowboarding si snowboard sizes	www.snowaybro.com/snowboards/sizing	Snowboard Sizing Guide, Charts & Calculator | Snow Way Bro	Quick and easy snowboard size calculator and sizing charts, to help you find the right gear for you and your specific riding habits.
2				
3				
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9				
10				

In this example, we've got the snowboard sizing page, which we've talked about a few times today, and in the second column, we've got the targeted keywords. So we've done that by the one P1 keyword, the two P2 keywords, and there is several P3 keywords. And for that URL, I've put in what the title tag is and what the Meta description tag is.

And I probably would have used the Portent SERP Preview Tool to help me get the sizing for that. And what I could do is I could actually add some more columns, so I could add in what the H1 tag is, the main heading, I could add in some secondary headings, and I could add in, you know, what I'm going to do to optimize images and content and that type of thing.

And the reason that this is quite important is it just kind of gives you a framework of working systematically page by page. And what you'll find is that it's a really good way of making sure that what needs to get done actually does get done, and it's something that you could share with your boss or your colleague.

So if they want to have any input or just see what you're up to, you can share this document. And the idea is that when you complete one of these rows, you can then go and make the changes on the actual live website. But I'd recommend, you know, drafting them out in a similar way to what you see here first. The next thing we're going to do for the action plan is that we want to do a little bit of a backlink audit, or really actually it's a reputation audit.

Off-page optimization and competitor research

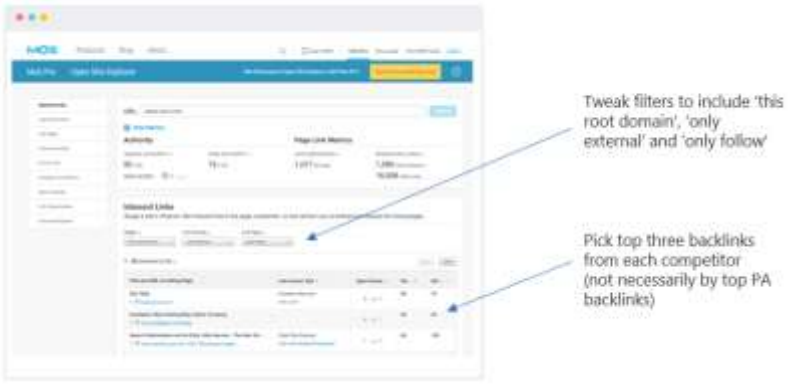
I want you to get your website's home page and I want you to come up with three competitors. And what you're going to do is, using the Moz Open Site Explorer tool, you're going to look to see what your home page authority is, what your domain authority is, and what your root domain links are. And we'll look at what root domain links are in a moment, but essentially, what we're looking for here is comparatively, how well are you doing compared to competitors?

Sites	Homepage Page Authority	Domain Authority	Root Domain Links
www.yourdomain.com	44%	42%	105
www.competitor1.com	40%	39%	97
www.competitor2.com	54%	54%	144
www.competitor3.com	67%	71%	999

So, in this case, the top one highlighted in blue, let's imagine that's your site, and comparatively, you're doing slightly better than competitor one, slightly worse than competitor two, and quite a way behind competitor three. And in terms of page authority and domain authority, it's actually much harder to jump from, say 45% to 50%compared to 40% to 45%.

Like, if we were to look at the graph, it's kind of like one of those exponential graphs, so it's very easy to climb from 10% to 20%, and 20% to 30% is sort of harder. But it gets more and more difficult as the number

So, when we come back to Open Site Explorer, this will help you gather some of the metrics we looked at earlier. You can get domain authority, page authority, and established links.


Tweak filters to include 'this root domain', 'only external' and 'only follow'
Pick top three backlinks from each competitor (not necessarily by top PA backlinks)

We've got root domains and we've got total links. So the root domains are the number of unique domains that are actually linking to your site, and the total links is the total number of links linking to your site, which might mean that some domains are linking more often than just once. And we tend to pay more attention to the root domains because each time you get a link from one domain, it's more significant than the multiple times after you may get links.

The other thing to bear in mind is when you use Open Site Explorer, what I tend to do is under inbound links, I change the target to be root domain. So that means that you're looking at backlinks, not just to the home page, but the overall domain, the root domain. I change the link source to be only external, so it's not talking about internal links, it's just external links, which essentially means backlinks, and I quite often change the link type to be only follow.

By being only follow, it's showing me links that are actually passing reputation, which is what we need for SEO.

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LESSON 5: MEASURING SEO PERFORMANCE

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TRAFFIC SOURCES

Monitor the sources of traffic to your website

What traffic sources are there that we need to know about for SEO? Well, we'll want to distinguish between direct traffic and traffic that can help SEO.

Direct traffic

So direct traffic is when people type in a URL to a website, maybe they bookmarked a URL, it could even be an untagged email.

So, when you open an email in Microsoft Outlook, there's not a way for Google Analytics to track that usually, or it could be links from PDFs. That's direct traffic, which is actually separate to organic traffic, or SEO traffic.

Referral traffic

Referral traffic is very related to SEO traffic. So, when you get traffic from another website, it could be from a blogger, it could be from a journalist, could even be social media, quite often this is through backlinks. So, the more referral traffic you get, particularly from sites that follow their links, the better you're probably going to be doing for SEO. So that's something that we look at.

Organic traffic

More specifically, what we're really interested in is organic traffic. This is visitors from search engines that are unpaid sources of traffic.

TYPES OF SEO METRICS

Measuring SEO success

There are a number of ways you can measure the success of your SEO:

- Keyword rankings: Monitoring where keywords are ranked and positioned
- Organic traffic: Monitoring the organic traffic on your website
- Conversions and sales: Tracking conversions and sales
- Referral traffic: Monitoring sites and pages that refer traffic to your website
- Link-building KPIs: Monitoring how well your website is acquiring backlinks

Early signs of SEO progress are seen at a keyword level first because you can see a rise in rankings before any traffic, conversions, or sales are generated.

Tools used for keyword ranking

There are many tools you can use for keyword ranking including: SEMrush, SEOmonitor, WhatsMySERP, Wincher, and ProRankTracker. Each tool offers keyword ranking functionality as well as other features. Some are more advanced than others, and you may need to pay a subscription to unlock the full suite of features. You can compare each tool to decide which would be the best option for you.

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- **SEMRush** is the leading tool for competitor keyword research. While SEMRush offers some functionality for free, the majority of features – including keyword rankings – require a subscription.
- **SEOmonitor** is another premium tool that offers keyword rankings. It also offers the ability to benchmark how well you are doing against competitors, and the tool hooks up to your Google Search Console account to help find keywords you may have missed.
- **WhatsMySERP** is a quick and free way to check your keyword rankings. While it works most of the time, it is not always reliable. An alternative free way to check rankings is the SERPs.com rank checker tool.
- **Wincher** is a low cost, good quality, and dedicated keyword ranking checking tool. If you don't want to pay for extra features, Wincher provides a good value option.
- **RankTracker Pro** is a low cost, good quality, and dedicated keyword ranking checking tool.

Measuring organic traffic

Organic traffic is best measured in a web analytics tool like Google Analytics. Organic traffic indicates that a visitor has come from SEO, so it's a good high-level way of reviewing progress. You can monitor organic traffic for the whole of a website, a section of it, or for specific URLs.

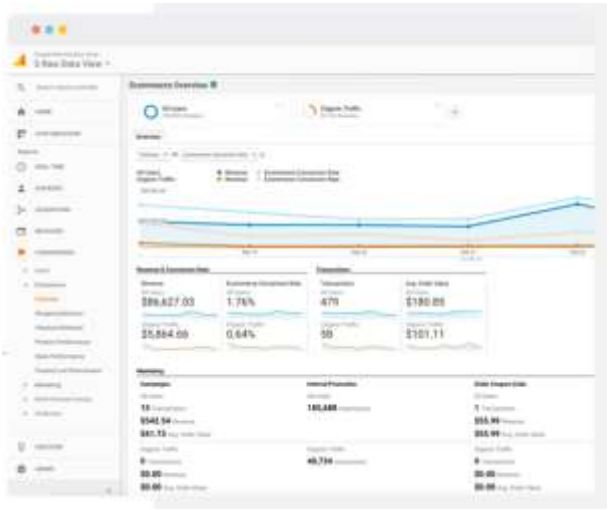
Monitoring your SEO traffic is straightforward in Google Analytics. You can do this by:

- Accessing 'Channels' from the 'Acquisition' menu and then viewing 'Organic Search', or
- Using the built-in Organic Search custom Google Analytics Segment

Like many of the other metrics, you might like to keep a close eye on it on a monthly basis and perhaps even compare it year-on-year to get an idea of seasonality.

Conversions and sales

Conversions and sales are also best measured in a web analytics tool like Google Analytics. It is possible to have good keyword rankings and traffic but low or no conversions, goals, or sales. This may indicate that the keyword research and SEO strategy was wrong. Conversions and sales metrics are often considered the most important SEO success metrics as they tend to be the most closely aligned to the business goals. In Google Analytics, a conversion can be measured through Goals. This can include lead generation – for example, newsletter sign ups, PDF downloads, and brochure requests.



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Tracking sales or conversions in Google Analytics requires extra customization, but it's worth it to obtain a more granular view of your SEO, such as seeing what landing pages are organically having the biggest impact. Once set up, monitoring your conversions and sales is straightforward in Google Analytics. You can do this by accessing the 'Conversions' menu and selecting the 'Organic traffic' segment.

Measuring referral traffic

Referral traffic is an important metric for SEO because it is a good sign that you are getting the right type of backlinks, as people are clicking on them to get to your website.

Tracking referrals is straightforward in Google Analytics. You can do this by accessing the 'Acquisition' menu. If your link building has resulted in relevant backlinks, you should notice that your referral traffic improves over time.

Increasing the total number of backlinks – and the total number of root domain links, from the right types of site – is a good metric because backlinks are one of the most important aspects that lead to SEO success.

Link building KPIs

Link Explorer is part of the Moz SEO toolset that is used specifically for link analysis. This example is a link analysis of the URL "https://www.evo.com" in Link Explorer. You can customize the results by applying settings such as the target, link source, and link type, and link state.

MEASURING SUCCESS

How to use metrics to measure performance

How can you measure success? Specifically, how can you use metrics to measure performance>

Keyword rankings

The first metrics that we can look at is keyword rankings. What we need to know is a definitive list of keywords that we want to target. Let's imagine that you've got a small site and there are 10 pages that you want to optimize.

If we optimize, on average, 6 keywords per page, that's 60 keywords that we probably want to keep an eye on a regular basis. And that's for quite a small site, a site with 10 pages. I would say typically for a more medium-size business, it could be anywhere from 100 to 200 keywords that we want to target on a regular basis.

Traffic

When it comes to traffic, we've looked at Google Analytics and how you can monitor organic traffic. Typically, you might monitor this on a month-by-month basis, so it be the current month compared to the previous month or it might be the current month compared to the previous year if there's a lot of seasonality in your business.

Conversions

When it comes to conversions, we're not only looking at traffic, but we're looking at things that lead to sales. So this could be email inquiries, this could be PDF downloads, and this is something that we can set up in Google Analytics and quite often, we do this through Google Analytics Goals.

So, if you're not familiar with Google Analytics Goals, that might be something that you want to check out and research.

Links

Finally, we looked at links. And the reason that links has its own KPI is because off-page optimization is actually probably the most important part of SEO. So we want to have a look at what other total number of links that your site currently has, what the total number of root domains that your site currently has and, over time, you'll want to increase that.

WALKTHROUGH: GOOGLE ANALYTICS & SEARCH CONSOLE MEASUREMENT

You can measure the success of your SEO activities using a tool like Google Analytics.

- In the **Admin** area of Google Analytics, link Google Search Console to Google Analytics
- Navigate to the **Acquisition** tab
- Click on **Search Console** to review SEO information on:
    - Landing pages
    - Countries
    - Devices
    - Queries
- Click on **All Traffic** to review your channels and how they are performing
- Click on **Referrals** to find out which websites are linking to your website

You can review your top SEO metrics in the Google Analytics interface. For a deeper dive into your SEO performance, you can jump back into Search Console itself.

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LESSON 6: ENHANCING YOUR PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

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APPROACHING PROBLEMS IN THE WORKPLACE

What is a problem-solving approach?

Many different types of problems can arise in the workplace. It's extremely useful to have strong problem-solving skills so that you are prepared to solve them in the most efficient way possible when they arise, saving you time and money.

It's important to be able to identify the full extent and cause of a problem before you begin to think about implementing a solution strategy. Workplace problems arise for various reasons. For example, interpersonal conflict, not having enough time to complete tasks, lack of self-belief, a shortage of tools or resources, poor communications, undue competitiveness within the workplace, conflicting job priorities, malicious gossip, culture clash, lack of opportunity, poor incentives, disconnection from company culture, lack of training, and so on.

Taking a problem-solving approach means viewing the issue at hand from different viewpoints – that is, objectively and subjectively – to allow you to implement the most suitable solutions.

Describing a problem objectively involves outlining it in a fact-based way that is observable, counted, quantifiable, provable, and impossible to deny. It presents complete truth, and is free from individual influences, so it proves helpful in rational decision-making.

If there is a lack of facts, then the problem becomes subjective, as you are describing the problem from a biased point of view or expression of opinion. Your point of view is based on your experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and opinions; and is influenced by emotions and personal feelings. The difference between viewing a problem objectively or subjectively depends on whether the evidence available is fact or opinion.

When considering a problem, subjective information is influenced by the personability of the person providing it. It is an interpretation or analysis of the facts based on personal beliefs, opinions, perspectives, feelings, and so on. In comparison, objective information produces the complete truth, as it presents a story from all angles in a systematic way. It describes the facts, which can be proven to be true.

Improving your problem-solving skills

The following methods for viewing and describing problems in the workplace can help you to improve your approach to problem solving:

First, consider your approach to the problem. Is it objective or subjective? Since an objective approach is best for allowing problem-solving, what do you need to do to gather facts? Be sure you have gathered all of the information available to you before making a decision.

Next, make sure you are as well informed as you can be about the problem. Consider what it is that you do not know about a specific subject, issue, area, or skill. Then consider how to equip yourself to attain this shortfall in knowledge.

And finally, take a moment to pause and reflect on the reasons why the problem arose in the first place. A little introspection is useful to help you to recognize if you have deviated from the plan and whether or not you need to re-align your focus.

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Problem-solving in action

You drop a jar of pickles onto the floor and it smashes. Obviously, action needs to be taken. So, you pause for a moment and consider what your immediate responses should be, and in what order you are going to carry them out.

Your responses could include: Cordoning off the area, telling everyone not to step in the mess, grabbing a dust-pan and brush, grabbing a floor-mop and a bucket of soapy warm water, and reminding people that the floor is now wet.

Or, instead of taking any of those actions, you might view the situation objectively, and decide to investigate what caused you to drop the jar in the first place. You may realize that the jar is simply covered in something oily and this caused you to lose your grip. Or you might suspect you were affected by a gas leak in your kitchen and decide to investigate and fix this potentially dangerous leak first, and then attend to the mess on the floor later.

When in the workplace, consider your held knowledge and ability to subjectively and objectively view an arising problem, before considering how you should go about solving it.

THE STAGES OF PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem-solving approach

A methodical approach should be taken to solving problems. Here is a six-step method you can use:

1. Identify the problem
2. Analyze the problem
3. Look for solutions
4. Make a decision
5. Implement the solution
6. Get feedback

Step 1: Identify the problem

In order to **identify the problem**, you need to ask: “Is the problem arising from a person, team, department, company, system, process, or malicious act?”, or, “Is the cause known yet?”

Step 2: Analyze the problem

Once you have identified the problem, it’s time to **analyze it**. Where is your information coming from? Are the facts on which you are basing your decision coming from an objective or subjective viewpoint? And are you able to accurately base your decision on facts vs. opinion?

Step 3: Look for solutions

Next, you’ll need to **look for solutions**.

A problem-solving solutions strategy can help you to come up with workable solutions for your problems. Solution strategies include:

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- Trial and error
- Using an algorithm, and
- Applying a heuristic technique

The old adage, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again' describes the trial and error strategy. For example, if your printer is broken, you could try checking the ink levels, and if that doesn't work, you could check to make sure the paper tray isn't jammed. Or perhaps the printer isn't actually connected to your laptop – check your connecting cables and power outlets. When using the trial and error strategy, you would continue to try different solutions until you have figured out an appropriate solution to your problem. Although trial and error is not typically one of the most time-efficient strategies, it is a commonly used one, and very effective.

An algorithm is a problem-solving formula that provides you with step-by-step instructions to help you achieve a desired outcome. You can think of an algorithm as a recipe with highly detailed instructions that produce the same result every time they are performed. Algorithms are used frequently in our everyday lives, offline as well as online. When you run a search on the Internet, search engines like Google use algorithms to decide which entries will appear first in your list of results. Facebook uses algorithms to decide which posts to display on your newsfeed. You can design your own algorithm as a solution to a problem and repeat the process as necessary.

A heuristic is another type of problem-solving strategy. While an algorithm must be followed exactly to produce a correct result, a heuristic is a general problem-solving framework. You can think of heuristics as mental shortcuts that are used to solve problems. A 'rule of thumb' is an example of a heuristic. Such a rule saves the person time and energy when making a decision, but despite its time-saving characteristics, it is not always the best method for making a rational decision. Working backwards is a useful heuristic in which you begin solving the problem by focusing on the end result. Another useful heuristic is the practice of accomplishing a large goal or task by breaking it into a series of smaller steps.

Step 4: Make a decision

Once you have found a solution, the next step is to **make a decision**. These days it is relatively easy to make an informed decision with the amount of information freely available on the internet. Take the appropriate time to research the problem and potential solutions so that you have all of the information you need to make a decision and find the best solution to your problem.

Research has found that most people fall into four decision-making styles: Directive, Conceptual, Consultative, or Consensus.

Directive is an autocratic model where the decision-maker uses their own knowledge and experience to select the best course of action. The decision-maker that uses a directive style practices rationality and displays a low tolerance for ambiguity.

Conceptual decision-makers approach problems in a more relaxed way. They are not averse to high-risk decisions and are comfortable without a full knowledge of all of the facts. They thrive on considering and analyzing different alternatives without singling out any one particular idea.

Consultative decision-making allows for input from others, while you are still in charge of the final outcome of the decision-making process. While you don't bargain agreement within the group, you seek the knowledge and expertise of others and everyone is aware that the final decision rests with you.

Consensus decision-making is where there is no single person responsible for the decision-making. The problem is challenged, debated, and concluded together. Everyone who is present can voice their opinion and have input into the course of action they believe will work. Personal views need to be set aside to support and action a team decision.

Step 5: Implement the solution

Once you have made a decision, you can then **implement it**. To implement the decision, action needs to be taken. It's important to keep on track throughout the process and to review your performance. Use the 3 As to do this: Action, Affirmation, and Assessment. Act on the decision you have made, affirm that it is the correct action to take, and then assess the effect it has had – that is, did it solve the problem?

Step 6: Get feedback

When your solution has been implemented, it's important to **ask for feedback** to ensure that it has been successful. Encourage a culture of open and honest opinions, and make sure that all of your team members are aware that their feedback will be considered carefully - this is an important part of motivation and confidence-building for future problem-solving tasks. When requesting feedback, be specific. The more specific your feedback request is in terms of context and detail, the more specific the answer you receive will be. Honestly and openly recognizing shortfalls in your own knowledge will help bring different opinions to the table. The encouragement of team discussion ensures that everyone's voice is heard and understood. And finally, remember to offer thanks to your team for their input and commitment and where possible, show them the positive impact their feedback has had. This will in turn empower them to look for solutions more proactively, and for future involvement in the decision-making process.

A useful and simple tip for problem-solving is to use a pen and paper when brainstorming solutions for your problem. Using pen and paper, rather than an app or online tool, to map out your potential problem-solving solutions can enable you to draw out the blockers from your subconscious and to gain a more objective overview. Now, different methods will suit different people but the main goal is to find a method that works best for you and allows you to gather and organize your thoughts in the easiest way possible. Once you have clearly identified the potential solutions, it is easier to compare them and choose the most effective solution.

SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem-solving skills

An effective problem-solver uses many skills to devise and implement solutions including:

- Creative skills
- Research skills
- Team-working skills
- Decision-making skills, and
- Risk-taking skills

Creative skills

Creative skills allow big and boundless thinking. They involve the consideration and analysis of ideas, concepts, and solutions that no one else has considered before. Thinking creatively requires

you to set aside any biases or assumptions that you may hold and to take a different look at things. By approaching a problem with an open mind, you allow yourself the chance to think creatively. Often, a problem may seem to be insurmountable and it is only by practicing creativity and innovation that a workable solution can be found. Considering a problem from different viewpoints and being open to a change in perspective is key.

For example, the US Air Force Research Laboratory required an update for their supercomputer but the cost was well over their budget. So, by thinking creatively and looking for alternative solutions, they realized that they could purchase 300 PlayStation 3s that would fulfil their computing needs instead. To quote their creative decision: “The processors in the Sony PlayStation 3 are the only brand on the market that utilizes the specific cell processor characteristics needed for this program at an acceptable cost.”

Another example of creative problem-solving is from the inventor and founder of Dyson® vacuum cleaners, James Dyson. While his competitors were focused on how to design a better filter for the paper bags in their vacuum cleaners, he came to the realization that he had to approach the problem from a more creative direction. The result was that he created a ‘cyclone’ vacuum cleaner which could separate dust from air, and brought the world's first bagless vacuum cleaner to the market.

Research skills

Another important set of skills for problem solving are **research skills**. How can you find out what you don’t know? By doing research.

Being able to demonstrate the following competencies is key to ensuring your research is effective:

- Attention to detail
- Critical thinking
- Planning and scheduling
- Technical skills
- Statistical and Graphical Analysis of Data, and
- Interviewing

Because data is so easily accessible these days, it is important to check that the data you are relying on has come from a trusted source.

Team-working skills

Team-working skills are also very useful when it comes to problem solving. If you lead a team, you can help your team or colleagues to solve problems in many ways.

Create easy wins to begin with. Pick the ‘low-hanging fruit’ for the team to practice upon, that is, the tasks that are easiest to achieve, or the problems that are easiest to solve. Resist the temptation to offer a solution to hurry the process along; act as a facilitator instead and guide your team toward the answers. The greatest impact can come from giving the accountability of owning both the solution and the implementation of the solution, to the team. By delegating the problem, you reinforce your confidence and trust in the work of the team.

You can also use the 'framing effect'. The ‘framing effect’ is a cognitive bias, whereby people decide on options based on whether the options are presented with positive or negative connotations; for example, as a loss or as a gain. Show your team or colleagues how to practice the skill of framing an

issue from differing perspectives, for example, positive, negative, or neutral, and how to devise specific solutions for each frame.

Another method is to remove yourself from the team problem-solving equation. Consider the unintentional influence you may have that might lead to potential biasing of the group with your views. In addition, be understanding and willing to support the team by working across the organization to acquire resources and budgets.

Avoid getting angry at a failure by the team as this is almost always destructive. Instead, instruct the team to take a step back and pause to consider the situation and analyze what did and did not work. Give them time to consider how to respond, learn, and move on.

Be sure to avoid group-think by drawing in individuals with areas of expertise and knowledge not currently held by the team. A common pitfall of group-think is that the team narrowly focuses on their own held-knowledge and plays down any outside or differing viewpoints, limiting the possibility of the most effective solution as an outcome.

Decision-making skills

Decision-making skills are another key component of problem solving. According to the economist Evan Davis, "If you are not making mistakes, you are not trying hard." This is true of many people, because due to their lack of experience, confidence, or authority, they resist the taking and making of decisions. The more decisions you make, the stronger your decision-making skills become. As long as you learn from your decisions and mistakes, then the more mistakes you make, the better it is for your decision-making ability!

Risk-taking skills

Having the **ability to take risks** is an important skill for effective problem solving. It is usually better to take determined risks rather than undetermined risks. Being able to distinguish between the two takes experience, skill, and knowledge.

An undetermined risk is a risk that is taken without performing due diligence or accounting for possible negative outcomes; that is, you may have found a positive solution, but you don't know what the final cost will be or what the 'knock-on' effects are.

A determined risk requires detailed research, and while you may not actually achieve success, you know that enough research has been carried out to ensure that there is a high likelihood of success.

Many people become risk-averse from building pros and cons into every single decision they make. We tend to avoid taking risks for the following reasons:

- A fear of failure
- A fear of the inflated consequences of failure, and
- A fear of handling the consequences of risk

However, a certain amount of risk-taking is necessary for every new solution, particularly in the beginning. Aiming to take calculated and well-informed risks only is a healthy and effective approach to problem solving.

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